Another heist from St. Louis:
Zobrist bled Cardinals red as kid

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Cubs fans may think they pulled a Lou Brock-style heist on the archrival Cardinals with the free-agent pickups of Jason Heyward and John Lackey.

Investigating further, the talent drain from St. Louis can now be expanded in a special way. Ben Zobrist, the other big free-agent catch of the off-season, bled Redbirds all his life until he was drafted by the Houston Astros out of Dallas Baptist University in 2004. So one less key Cardinal fan out in the 5,000-resident city of Eureka, in the next county east of Peoria, could convert a few fans to the Cubs on the informal border – Interstate 74 – that cleaves team loyalties in central Illinois.

Zobrist starting out in the wrong, red color was merely a family thing.

“I was probably an obnoxious Cardinals fan,” admitted Tom Zobrist, Ben’s father, pastor of Liberty Bible Church in Eureka.

“Your favorite team is the Cardinals and your second-favorite team is whoever is playing the Cubs. You’ve heard that before. It’s kind of like the Bears playing the Packers. It’s really kind of ironic in maybe it’s the Lord’s sense of humor that now I’m like a Cubs fan.
“I’ve grown as a human being that I don’t need to be obnoxious anymore. I can be happy for teams I’m not a fan of because of players that are on it or people that I know are fans of that team.”

The old-father son link is broken due to big-league employment and, frankly, the younger Zobrist playing in a city he always liked and for a manager who made his career in Tampa Bay. But long before there were big-league dreams, and just a Field of Dreams-like small-town upbringing, the love of all things Whiteyball and its successors was handed down to Ben Zobrist in classic fashion.

**Dressed in Redbird colors as a baby**

“The first picture of him, he was less than a year old, and he had a baby Cardinals hat on his head,” said Tom Zobrist. “He was raised a Cardinals fan. His favorite player was Ozzie Smith. He never went to Wrigley Field. He always went to Busch Stadium. His first time at Wrigley Field was two years ago when the Rays made a stop there.”

Another Cardinals-rooting Zobrist was simply continuing the in-house family baseball division into the next generation.

“In my dad’s family, his brothers and my grandpa they were all kind of evenly split,” Tom Zobrist said. “I had a couple of uncles who were hardcore Cubs fans. I had a couple of uncles who were hardcore Cardinals fans. My dad was a Cardinal fan. My grandpa used to tell me you should go for your home state. I was just whatever my dad was.”

But the arrival of Joe Maddon as Cubs manager enabled Ben Zobrist to think in a new dimension beyond the virtually genetic love of St. Louis.

“We had a discussion at Christmas (2014) prior to Ben’s last contract year at Tampa Bay,” Tom Zobrist said. “He asked, ‘What if the Cubs make me an offer and try to sign me? How would you think about it?’ I said it would be great, I’d love if you were in Chicago. We’ve always been a fan of Maddon.
“When we found out he signed with the Cubs, we did the walk-off dance in the parking lot where he told us.”

**Theo to Ben: I want you**

After the end of the 2015 World Series, Theo Epstein told Ben Zobrist his acquisition would be a priority, given a trade (of Starlin Castro).

“Our hope was he was going to sign there,” Tom Zobrist said. But the situation got dicey when Epstein still had not moved Castro and Ben Zobrist went on a free-agent tour of New York and San Francisco. He talked to even more teams. Ben Zobrist even suggested his parents pray for the preferred outcome of the reunion with Maddon as time ticked for a decision on his 2016 employer.

Yet he had never gotten the Cardinals totally out of his mind. As family celebrated the Royals’ World Series win that netted Ben his first ring, Tom Zobrist asked his son, “How do you top this?” Ben replied, “I guess I need to go win one with the Cardinals.” Tom Zobrist informed him of the cosmic impact of a Cubs championship: “If you really want to top it, you need to go win one with the Cubs.”

Going to the near-dynastic atmosphere of St. Louis would not get Ben’s juices flowing as much as breaking sports’ greatest-ever championship drought.

“Ben’s like all these guys,” said his father. “They like a challenge. They like going uphill.”

Epstein’s recruiting video of sketching out a championship scenario “really stirred him up when he saw it.” Obviously, though, Maddon gave any suitor an edge. “He credits Joe a lot for the player he is,” Tom Zobrist said. “To win one with Joe really appeals to him.”

The former super utility man, slated for a season-long home at second base at Wrigley Field, already had a base motivation. Ben was a tall, skinny kid playing against small-school competition in high school. Scouts were not going to beat down the family’s door. Neither the Cubs and Cardinals came after him.

That’s how he shared the experience of Jim Thome, seemingly ignored by his childhood hero Cubs up the road in Peoria. Thome was a wrong-field-hitting shortstop who ended up getting picked in the 13th round by the Indians.
“He needed to go to college,” Tom Zobrist said of his son’s stints at nearby Olivet Nazarene and hundreds of miles away at Dallas Baptist University. “He grew a couple of inches and put on some weight – he was a late-bloomer physically.”

The Twins and Brewers were interested. On the morning of the June draft in 2004, Ben received a call he had always wanted to get.

**Cardinals call on Draft Day**

“He actually heard from the Cardinals,” Tom Zobrist recalled. “They said something like do you want to play baseball as a career? Ben said yes. The Cardinals said we’re looking at you somewhere around the 10th round. We were really excited, but we didn’t know what would happen.

“We were actually out in the church yard, playing catch. And (Cindi Zobrist, Ben’s mother) came running out the front door and said he was drafted. She didn’t say by who.

“We never heard (before Draft Day) from Houston. They were very secretive.”

Now that Ben is batting in the middle of a powerful Cubs lineup, he will turn some Cardinals fans in his direction, although not backing a Cubs’ World Series bid per se.

“A lot of people have said to me, I’m still a Cardinals fan, but I’m rooting for Ben,” Tom Zobrist said. “I’ve noticed some posts on Facebook about him.”

There has been at least one Cubs convert due to Ben.

“I do know one guy in particular who is wearing Cub gear and is wearing Ben jerseys,” Tom Zobrist said. “The Cubs fans? They’re in heaven to have someone they know on the team or someone from the high school on the Cubs.

“It’s going to be a lot of fun for people. I told my family who are Cardinals fans: the one thing we dreaded our whole lives is the Cubs actually will win it while we’re around. I said at least if the Cubs win now, there’s a family member on the team they can rejoice with.”

Family and friends must find new ways of dealing with Ben’s Cubs stature. Tom Zobrist has advised many to not simply call him if the Cubs or his son are in a slump. No. 1, he already would know those facts and No. 2, he has no ready explanation other than “that’s baseball.”
Ticket requests go through agent

The personal connections, including Tom and Cindi, also know not to bother Ben with ticket requests now that Wrigley Field is a three-hour drive, just a day (or night) trip distant. Such requests are now funneled to the younger Zobrist’s agent’s firm in Chicago, which possesses a list of family and friends to be accommodated. And that includes his very closest kin.

“He said, ‘Dad, if you want to come, just call Jennifer, she’ll take care of it, and text me that you’ll be at the game. And then I’ll see you and put you on the pass list for the family area afterward.’ He’s trying to take care of that ahead of time so he doesn’t have to deal with that on a day-to-day basis.”

The Cubs’ scheduled home opener was good timing for the old man, though. His scheduled off day from Liberty Baptist is Monday. A week later is the first series in St. Louis, also starting on a Monday. The elder Zobrists are happy they can now drive to games in Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee and even Cincinnati. Ben has an open invitation for his parents to stay at his newly-purchased Chicago-area home if they come for more than one game at a time.

“Over the next four years, I’m going to try to get to all these places,” Tom Zobrist said. “I’ve never been to a game in Cincinnati, never been to a game in Pittsburgh. I’d like to get to some different National League parks as he hadn’t played there.”

The treat for Ben Zobrist will be extended time in Chicago. As a child, he loved the family’s visits to the city during the Christmas holidays.

“We love Chicago,” said Tom Zobrist.

Not as much as his son if he helps favorite manager Maddon finish the job.